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ABSTRACT

When the State of Utah implemented a comprehensive guidance program, it began with a state-sponsored training of school guidance teams. Successfully identifying and displacing non-guidance activities (NGAs) in the comprehensive guidance program was a complicated process and was dependent upon communication and building positive relationships with those involved. Special funding that was available to schools that met the standards set by the program helped the transition process. This document describes how one school district, when the state began new accountability measures that meant more testing, managed not to add another non-guidance testing activity to their counselors. Instead, they created a non-counselor manager of school-wide testing to fill the need. The history of this process is described. (JDM)

Sharing Responsibility for Schoolwide Testing Programs: No NGAs in Our Schools

by

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Chapter Six

Sharing Responsibility for Schoolwide Testing Programs: *No NGAs in Our Schools*

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As the specialist for comprehensive guidance in Utah, I knew that statewide implementation of the comprehensive guidance program had arrived when a very competent, confident high school principal commented to me during an on-site peer evaluation of his school's guidance program. "Judy," he said, "I want you to know that the counselors are free from NGAs in this school." I searched through my intelligence database to attach a meaning to this acronym. NGA was one with which I had no familiarity. My perplexed expression prompted the counselors in the room to explain to me that the principal kept all *non-guidance activities* (NGAs) away from the counselors so they could focus on direct services to students. The satisfaction I felt in hearing both the comment and the explanation of NGAs reinforced the state-mandated strategy of training counselors and administrators together in planning, designing, and implementing a comprehensive approach to counseling and guidance. This principal had passed the training exam, and he spoke the comprehensive guidance language.

Utah Comprehensive Guidance Structure

Early in the program implementation process, specialists at the Utah State Office of Education adopted a training strategy for comprehensive guidance that requires school guidance teams to participate in state-sponsored training. The school guidance team includes counselors, guidance secretaries, key teachers, and most important, school administrators. I must admit that it was difficult to lure administrators from their schools to attend a statewide comprehensive guidance training session, but the mileage gained from this strategy, which is still in place

today, has had a significant effect in Utah. Administrators have learned to speak the language of the comprehensive guidance program and have been taught to recognize that the time counselors spend with students addressing the program components (guidance curriculum, individual planning, and responsive services) is of critical importance. With 12 consecutive years of program implementation, school counselors in Utah, and specifically in the Granite School District, are now diligently working toward comprehensive guidance program *enhancement* largely because state, district, and local school administrators have made it a high priority to move non-guidance activities away from school counselors.

District-Level Steering and Advisory Committees

School advisory and steering committees are defined as key components of the structural framework of the Utah Model for Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance (Utah State Board of Education, 1998). The advisory committee provides support and assists in establishing a direction and identifying goals for a school or district guidance program. The steering committee not only designs the methods of implementing and achieving the goals, but also provides on-site school/district management for the guidance program. Granite District guidance leaders have adhered to the structural framework outlined by the Utah model and have organized both district advisory and steering committees.

The district-level committees, which bring leadership, continuity, and consistency to the guidance program across the district, have been in place since the early years of program implementation. (The district guidance leaders include a student services director and two coordinators for secondary counseling and comprehensive guidance.) The district comprehensive guidance steering committee has been most productive in attending to displacing non-guidance activities and facilitating districtwide management of the comprehensive guidance program. The current membership structure of the steering committee includes the district student services director, district coordinators for counseling and guidance, and the comprehensive guidance chair (counselor) from each secondary school. The steering committee holds regular monthly meetings and is chaired by a district coordinator for secondary counseling and guidance.

Program Standards for Time Allocation

The traditional position orientation of school counseling, heavily laden with non-guidance activities, is far removed from the role established for counselors in a comprehensive guidance program, where time management is a key component. The paradigm shift that occurred in

Utah, from a "counselor position" to a "guidance program," led to statewide program consistency based on 12 program standards. The Utah Model for Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance (Utah State Board of Education, 1998) specifies that no less than 80% of counselors' time is to be spent providing direct services to 100% of the student population and limits indirect services to not more than 20% of their time. No time is allocated for non-guidance activities. The Utah model addresses the concept of *displacement*—i.e., replacing undesired or inappropriate activities or duties with desired guidance program activities—and suggests target time percentages in each of the guidance program components. In addition, the Comprehensive Guidance Program Standards require counselors to show evidence that the time allocations are being met through a master calendar, counselor daily log, or both. As a consequence of the specific time allocations for direct services, when new school duties emerge, the school counselor is not as likely as in years past to take on new (usually non-guidance) tasks.

Utah counselors are very fortunate that since 1993 the state legislature has appropriated funding for the comprehensive guidance program. Schools qualify to receive funding when they have met guidance program standards outlined by the Utah Model for Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance. Because this funding was available, early in the comprehensive guidance program implementation process in Granite School District, student services leaders made an innovative commitment to school counselors in an effort to eliminate non-guidance activities. The district agreed to hire a comprehensive guidance assistant (paraprofessional) for 30 hours a week in each secondary school once the guidance program had met the stringent program standards outlined in the Utah model. The guidance assistants' major duties are clerical tasks and other non-guidance activities previously done by counselors.

Counselors' Concern over New Accountability Measures

Over the past several years in Utah, the governor's office, the legislature, the State Board of Education, and the State Office of Education have been advocating, exploring, and working on strategies and means to install an effective accountability/assessment system to measure performance. The 2001 Utah State Legislature passed an act that establishes provisions related to such a system. The new accountability system, called the Utah Performance Assessment System for Students, or U-PASS, is intended to provide the public, the legislature, the state school board, school districts, schools, and teachers with evaluative information regarding students' levels of proficiency. The two key

elements of U-PASS are (a) tests and measurements and (b) publicly reported data. As U-PASS progressed from a proposal to reality, counselors in Granite School District (and other districts) were extremely concerned over the emphasis in the law on required schoolwide tests and measurements. U-PASS requires a norm-referenced achievement test in grades 3, 5, and 11 (typically the Stanford Achievement Test); Utah's core curriculum criterion-referenced tests in identified grades and subject areas; a new Basic Skills Competency Test (BSCT) in grade 10, passing which is required for high school graduation; a direct writing assessment in grades 6 and 9; and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to be administered in a random sample of schools.

Granite School District counseling and guidance leaders and school counselors foresaw "warning signs" of additional duties tied to testing as the details of accountability and assessment emerged. Counselors recognized that they could be the likely choice as the professional in the school who would manage schoolwide testing and accompanying responsibilities. School counseling and guidance professionals in Granite District and throughout Utah recognized and celebrated the progress they had made in moving from a position orientation to a comprehensive guidance program approach, and consequently were not likely to succumb to new schoolwide testing demands. It became very obvious that displacing non-guidance activities had to be attended to on a regular basis in order to maintain the progress made in comprehensive guidance program implementation.

The Process of Responding to the New Accountability Measures

Identifying and displacing non-guidance tasks involves a change process that is at the core of a comprehensive guidance program. The change process occurs at all levels of program development and management: planning, designing, implementing, evaluating, and enhancing. It is critical for counselors to recognize that the change process needs constant attention. To fully understand how Granite School District counselors attend to identifying and displacing non-guidance activities and maintaining a guidance program focus on an ongoing basis, recounting a brief story of a change process in progress is imperative. The events or timely circumstances leading to the displacement of existing and potential schoolwide testing responsibilities are worth sharing. It will become clear through the following narrative that continued guidance program success in this situation and others necessitates *leadership* at the state and local district levels, a *working* district steering committee, a *well-informed* school board, *trained* and *knowledgeable* district and school

administrators, and *dedicated* school counselors. Furthermore, an individual from among the aforementioned groups must emerge as the leader to manage the *work in progress* by coordinating all aspects of the change process.

In light of the impending accountability legislation, in January 2001 the state guidance specialists at the Utah State Office of Education sent a memorandum to all Utah school counselors, district student services directors, and district counseling supervisors and coordinators. The memo addressed concerns about the U-PASS legislation and specifically the grade 10 BSCT. The memo stated the position that "at most, the registration, administration, and tracking of BSCT are 'fair share' responsibilities of the professional school counselor and all of the educators in a building." The memo suggested that professionals in the school other than the counselor could assume these tasks. Moreover, the memo recommended that schools and districts look at "alternate approaches to illustrate how they could handle BSCT on a 'fair share' basis. Such an approach will help reduce professional school counselor involvement in non-guidance activities and ensure that counselors can maintain 80% of aggregate time on direct services to students."

Developing the Recommendation

The memo from the state office served as a catalyst for Granite District counseling and guidance leaders and school counselors to initiate a change process. They recognized an immediate need to be proactive in identifying and displacing any existing counselor duties associated with schoolwide testing in preparation for what could come. In February 2001, in the midst of the legislative session, the district comprehensive guidance steering committee met to discuss not only current issues and concerns connected to schoolwide testing, but also the possibility that counselors could be targeted as the professionals in the school to take on increased testing responsibilities under U-PASS. A very positive steering committee meeting ensued.

The district comprehensive guidance steering committee reached consensus on a recommendation that counselors immediately begin to identify and assess the amount of time currently spent on schoolwide testing duties and give attention to displacing as many of these duties as possible. The steering committee members agreed that a full-time guidance assistant (increased from 30 hours per week) could be a solution to the U-PASS schoolwide testing management dilemma. On returning to their schools, the counselors began a time and task analysis of their current schoolwide testing duties. The district student services director took the steering committee recommendation of a full-time guidance assistant to district administrators and advocated for keeping the

U-PASS schoolwide testing management responsibilities off the counselors' plate.

During the same time frame, as luck would have it, the Granite District school board and district-level administrators were in the process of developing long-range goals and objectives for the district for the next five years. The school board and district administrators engaged in a variety of events and activities as part of the strategic planning process, one of which was an electronic survey of 11th-grade students. The survey focused on an assortment of school issues and concerns. Concerning counseling and guidance, the surveyed students reported that having more time with their counselors and easier access to them was a high priority. Survey results, combined with the fact that schools are always in need of both personnel and programs to carry out interventions with students at risk, reinforced district support for safeguarding counselor time with students and moving the guidance assistant to full-time status.

A critical meeting involving the district student services director, district comprehensive guidance coordinators, and high school principals was held to discuss the feasibility of identifying an individual other than a counselor to manage schoolwide testing. The district student services director presented to the principals the steering committee recommendation that the guidance assistant be increased to full-time status and assume responsibility for schoolwide testing. The principals' response to the recommendation was mixed but generally supportive. The district student services director emerged as the leader in this change process. She also recognized the need to add a new dimension to principals' education about the comprehensive guidance program when one principal said she was not sure what counselors really did and another said he would continue to handle schoolwide testing his way. Although the principals had attended statewide training in the comprehensive guidance program, it seemed not all were remembering and practicing what they had learned.

The meeting with the high school principals established a forum for open communication about schoolwide testing and an opportunity to build and strengthen relationships necessary for future steps in the change process. Next came a discussion with key district administrators (assistant superintendents, the student services director, the research and assessment director, the applied technology education director, and others), out of which the steering committee recommendation was modified. The district administrators determined that it was cost prohibitive to increase the guidance assistants to full-time status. However, they agreed that identifying an individual other than the counselors to oversee schoolwide testing was important. They proposed that each secondary school would be allocated a set amount from comprehensive guidance funds to support a schoolwide testing manager. It was determined that the funds could be used to extend the hours of the school's comprehensive guidance assistant

or to provide a stipend to a department chair or other interested teacher (but not a counselor).

The change process continued with a new memo drafted jointly by the district student services director and the district research and assessment director and sent to all junior high and high school principals. It outlined the recommendation that school principals identify a manager for schoolwide testing (using aforementioned funding) as follows: "To keep in compliance with guidance program standards and for counselors to have sufficient time to provide direct services to students, we are recommending that school principals identify a manager for schoolwide testing other than a counselor." The memo also reinforced that "the use of testing data is very much a part of counseling students. Test administration is largely clerical and requires a great deal of time. It is our goal to move counselors away from the clerical tasks and thus have more time for students."

The secondary principals eventually needed more information and clarification about the new position of manager for schoolwide testing, and the district research and assessment director was ready to send out new school-year directives on testing. In the past, the schoolwide testing information had been channeled to "head counselors" or "testing counselors," bypassing the student services office, principals, and others. This time, however, the district research and assessment director made a positive effort to send directives about schoolwide testing to all of the key players, including principals, testing managers, and head counselors. These directives outlined again the rationale for moving the clerical and organizational responsibilities of schoolwide testing management away from the counselors. They also reinforced the allocation of comprehensive guidance funds for each school to cover the cost of a testing manager.

Unexpected Obstacles

It is significant to note that an initial obstacle the district guidance leaders faced in persuading schools to identify a test manager was the counselors. A week or so before school was scheduled to begin, the aforementioned district directives on a manager for schoolwide testing were presented by a district comprehensive counseling and guidance coordinator to all secondary counselors and guidance assistants at their opening institute. The information was new to some counselors and was met with mixed feelings (sometimes we are our own worst enemy), but most counselors applauded the new direction. Recognizing some of the counselors' frustrations in the discussion at the opening counselor meeting, the district counselors' association conducted a telephone poll of its elected officers and presented a position to the steering committee in support of a manager

for schoolwide testing.

However, once counselors and principals had an opportunity to discuss the new directives together, district student services leaders encountered interference. Some principals expressed concern that the district was trying to change their school's current practice of test administration rather than just the management piece. Other principals expressed that they felt left out of the planning and development phase of the change process and wished that they had been included more in the early discussion phase of the process.

It was necessary to dialogue with the counselors to pinpoint any frustrations and concerns. An emergency meeting of the district steering committee occurred a few days following the opening counselor institute. Counselors were given an opportunity to express their concerns, which covered a variety of issues. Some counselors expressed possessiveness over their current ties to testing, stating that they were the only individuals in the school who could manage schoolwide testing professionally or that others in the school might not be as competent or capable of managing testing. Other counselors expressed concern over funding connected to the new position; they felt uncomfortable with putting a price tag on the testing duty, given that the district had not paid counselors for the task in the past.

Back on Track: Lessons Learned

It can be officially reported that each secondary school in Granite School District has been allocated funds to support a non-counselor manager for schoolwide testing. It is critical to recognize that identifying and displacing non-guidance activities connected to this whole issue of schoolwide testing is indeed a work in progress. Overall, the lessons learned in this particular initiative far outweigh any obstacles. As previously indicated, the majority of the counselors clearly supported the move to a manager for schoolwide testing. They could foresee that the testing and assessment requirements of U-PASS could create major barriers (non-guidance duties) to full implementation of a comprehensive guidance program if responsibility for testing were directed toward them. The district student services director gave leadership to the change process and facilitated districtwide discussion of the issue at hand. It was reiterated repeatedly that the desired outcome was more counselor time devoted to direct services to students. Keeping the students foremost in their minds gave counselors motivation to work through difficulties in the transition period. Ultimately, having a manager for schoolwide testing can enhance all aspects of the schools' comprehensive guidance programs and will help to clarify an *appropriate*, fair-share role for counselors in light of the required tests and measurements of U-PASS.

Furthermore, both counselors and principals agree that the interpretation of testing data is still very much an important role the counselor plays in direct services to students, specifically in individual planning and responsive services.

All of the key players in the change process have since made recommendations to the district to ensure the position of a manager of schoolwide testing. The district leaders have recommended that counselors should not relinquish involvement in schoolwide testing completely, but that they should participate as team members with teachers in the test administration process required by U-PASS. The principals value their counselors' expertise and leadership, and have requested that the counselors who have been responsible for some testing duties in past years work in concert with the new test managers in this transitional year. Finally, counselors and principals strongly recommended that the district research and assessment director develop a manual for test managers and conduct districtwide training.

Fundamental Insights

Identifying key players is critical in any change process. State office leaders, district-level administrators, student services and counseling and guidance leaders, the district research and assessment director, local school board members, principals, school counselors, guidance assistants, and others contributed to initiating the change process, and they will continue to be involved in the implementation phase. Successfully identifying and displacing non-guidance activities in the comprehensive guidance program is dependent not only upon identifying the key players, but also upon establishing good communication and building positive relationships with those involved in and influenced by the proposed change. It is also critical to recognize that schools are part of a larger system, and making a change will likely affect other parts of the system. Key guidance leaders at the state, district, and local school levels must not overlook the importance of giving unrelenting attention to the process of identifying and displacing non-guidance activities. In the words of Michael Fullan (2001, p. 32), "Change, whether desired or not, represents a serious personal and collective experience characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty; and if the change works out, it can result in a sense of mastery, accomplishment, and professional growth."

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About the Author

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